DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 911 CS 214 151

AUTHOR	Mackey, Margaret
TITLE	Picture Books and the Making of Readers: A New Trajectory. NCTE Concept Paper No. 7.
INSTITUTION	National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill.
PUB DATE	93
NOTE	38p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096 (Stock No. 35560).
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Beginning Reading; *Childrens Literature; Early Childhood Education; *Early Reading; *Picture Books; *Reading Processes; Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS	*Emergent Literacy; Historical Background; Literacy as a Social Process

ABSTRACT

Picture books enable children to experience "reading" from a very early stage in their lives. Although readers in the early part of this century were trained to read heavy books full of fine print, nowadays readers are being trained to read using intellectually and emotionally challenging picture books. Such books (particularly those by John Burningham) enable young readers to tackle material beyond their normal repertoire. The concepts the picture books describe are very sophisticated, yet young children do not seem to have any problem coming to terms with them. Several scholars have investigated the complexities in picture books which even very early readers can begin to master. J. A. Appleyard emphasizes the strong element of play and the important transition small children make from the intimacy of being read to at home to the intensely social experience of school reading. Perry Nodelman describes the range and variety of conventions which picture-book authors and illustrators call into play. Judith Graham investigates what and how children learn from picture books about narrative processes and conventions. The vocabulary of Peter Rabinowitz lends itself to a more activist interpretation of what the reader does. Contemporary children's stories make use of new and different conventions, and in the process may well be creating new and different readers. Picture books give even extremely young children access to literary codes. Armed with this background, however vestigial, children can be readers. (Contains 37 references.) (RS)

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NCTE Concept Papers

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Margaret Mackey
University of Alberta

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Picture Books and the Making of Readers:
A New Trajectory

Perhaps it is only in my mind that readers of an earlier generation were unduly influenced by grandfathers. I find a collaged image in my brain of precocious self-starting readers, sitting on the floor of a grandfather's study, poring over the dense pages of Robert Louis Stevenson or someone similar until the words began to make sense.

Two real grandfathers will have to serve as the props of this figment; Jean-Paul Sartre's is one:

> I began my life as I shall no doubt end it: among books. In my grandfather's study, they were everywhere; it was forbidden to dust them except once a year, before the October term. Even before I could read, I already revered these raised stones; upright or leaning, wedged together like bricks on the library shelves or nobly spaced like avenues of dolmens, I felt that our family prosperity depended on them. (28)

The second is Margaret Meek's, and it is perhaps a sign of greater nearness to our own day that this grandfather found words outside the study:

> I remembered my grandfather teaching me to read from the public print that said OXO, and from the writing on the enamelled panels nailed to the wooden railing of our small seaside railway station which carried advertising messages about the literacy of that time.
>
> *They come as a boon and a blessing to men,*
> *The Pickwick, the Owl and the Waverley pen.*
>
> As we lingered on the platform my grandfather would explain, rather

> more often than I liked, the relation of Pickwick, Owl and Waverley to a world of writing now almost out of memory. He was one of the first boys to go to his village school in 1868, just before primary education became compulsory. He was an eager pupil, so much so that for most of his life thereafter when he could choose to do what he wanted, he wrote and read till he died in his late eighties. The texts he preferred were in Hebrew and German. (1991, 6)

Sartre is dead; Meek is old enough to be retired. In my own family, I have to go back another generation, to my great-grandfather, to get a glimpse of this kind of literacy--and it was a glimpse that excluded rather than engaged me. When my grandparents' farmhouse was cleared after their deaths, I happened to be around, and was invited to choose a book or two for myself. There was only one I could even contemplate carrying home: an old Sunday-school prize won by my grandmother. The house was filled with huge and formidable volumes owned by my grandfather's father, a Presbyterian minister. Even for a confirmed book enthusiast like me, the prospect of taking just one of these books was completely out of the question. Their theology was intimidating, but even more so was their dense, double-columned, tiny print.

My great-grandfather was at least trained to read such forbidding material, and had made some kind of a living by doing so. An even more startling and impressive example of the literacy of earlier generations lies in the miners' libraries of South Wales. The miners of the 1920s and 1930s worked long, hard, dirty hours underground; their pithead clubs were their main form of social life. A number of these miners' institutes organized libraries for their members. Although many of these libraries were later disbanded and lost, the South Wales Miners' Library in Swansea has collected enough sample collections and lending records to give some picture of the reading patterns of these manual laborers, who valued reading even after long working days and the additional time it took to manage a home on small wages. A look at this library is humbling. Again we see the small, dense print, the

double columns, the heavy prose--though the miners of South Wales preferred politics to Presbyterianism. Hywel Francis has done a great deal of work with what has been salvaged from these libraries (the depredations of second-hand book salesmen were considerable as the social structure changed and the pithead institutions lost their key role in the communities). He made a study of the books which remain from the Cambrian (Clydach Vale) Miners' Institute Library, tallying the borrowing records from the slips inside the books. A book entitled *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy* was borrowed 17 times between 1921 and 1929. Karl Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy* was checked out 10 times between 1920 and 1933. The Webbs's *History of Trade Unionism* had 20 outings between 1921 and 1953. Topical books on serious subjects like Hitler and Stalin were borrowed many times, but Freud's book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* was also borrowed 11 times between 1923 and 1929. These numbers are not large except when considered in the context of a very small community. Probably the most popular books fell apart or were snapped up by the book buyers, but the overall effect of the list of titles which remained to be tallied tells a story of considered self-improvement and self-discipline. The visual impact of the collection in Swansea leaves an indelible impression of heavy books and small print; of readers who earned their knowledge through a kind of industry and attention most readers today are never called upon to produce.

Anecdotes from France, Scotland, Nova Scotia, and Wales do not comprise a world survey, or even a Western overview, of any substance. What they do provide is a point of perspective. However readers are learning these days, they are not learning to be the kind of reader who is described above. Reading is an activity which is socially determined; even the different skills, aptitudes, and arts which work together to make reading possible vary with the changing times.

The grandfather who looms symbolically large over today's learning readers is a fictional one: John Burningham's *Granpa*. He stars in a book which would probably astound those earlier grandfathers, whose reading sophistication was of an entirely different sort. His story is moving, laconic, elliptical, told in two different

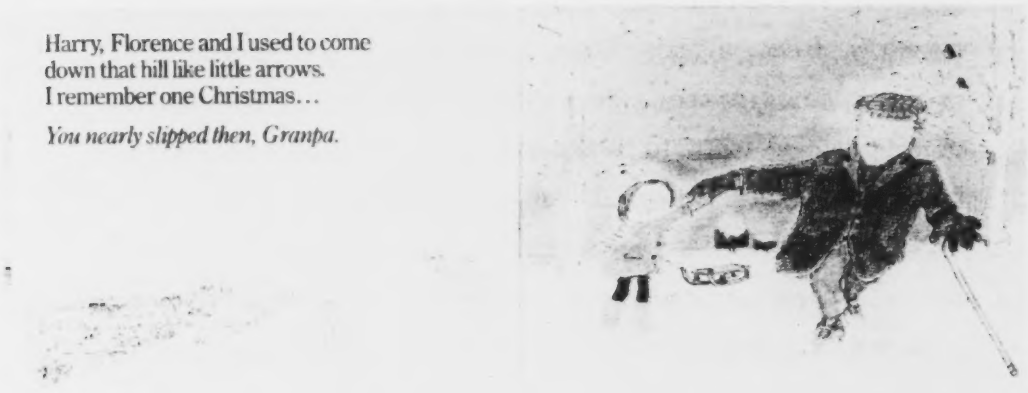
Harry, Florence and I used to come
down that hill like little arrows.
I remember one Christmas...
You nearly slipped then, Granpa.

Figure 1. *Granpa* by John Burningham

types of print and a variety of colored and sepia drawings, making up 32 pages and 223 words from title page to ambiguous ending. The book consists of lines of dialogue between the grandfather and his granddaughter; there is almost no explicit connection between one opening and the next. The colored pictures support the dialogue on the page; the sepia pictures are more ambiguous and act almost as a commentary on the conversations.

John Burningham is widely known as an author and illustrator, much of whose work is accessible to very young children. His books will serve well as part of a framework for inspecting how children may learn to read today, often using images and fragments to create a whole in a way that the most sophisticated analyst of the reading process would recognize.

My own children were seven and nine when they first encountered *Granpa,* and it was one of the few times that I made notes of their first responses to a book. This is what I wrote:

> Initial reaction after a glance: "This is big print." After a page and a half: "It isn't a baby book; it's hard." Later: "There's a different story on each page." Empty chair caused consternation. Beth [aged nine] instantly said, "He's died," and later looked at that page very

meditatively. Sarah [aged seven] was not happy with this and suggested he might have just gone off somewhere. I asked her if that seemed likely given the preceding pages, and she agreed it wasn't likely, but only reluctantly. Much debate over the baby on the last page--is it new brother or sister, or is that the girl grown up (witness hat!) with her own baby, or is it Granpa himself as a baby? Some discussion about what the girl said to make Granpa so cross as well--Sarah's vote for "I hate you" (offered almost instantaneously on first reading), Beth suggesting, more tentatively, "You're going to die before I am" (second reading--death not predicted at all first time round).

Granpa is a challenging book, both intellectually and emotionally, and my daughters, who by then had a long history of reading picture books, found plenty to absorb. Although most picture books in our house have by now been relegated to the basement, *Granpa* still sits on the shelf of the younger girl, now eleven, and she reads it regularly.

Judith Graham gives a convincing account of how *Granpa* draws on conventions of television to provide the child reader with the tools to interpret the story:

It is possible that adults anticipate difficulty with this book on children's behalf because to some extent the traditions out of which it springs are very recent. The scraps of text are entirely in dialogue, grandfather's words in bold type, his grand-daughter's in italics. Much of what they say seems to be non-sequiturs. Adults may hear echoes of Pinter but for the child reader it is familiarity with television, where all stories come in pictures and dialogue, that gives the book its coherence. The book proceeds in a televisual way: the episodes are short and "cut" *in medias res.* The television-trained child will not expect sequence but will be looking for a holding frame. The sepia

> annotations serve several purposes, all well-known from the television screen: close-ups . . . flashbacks . . . sudden visions . . . glimpses . . . the freeze-frame. . . . As to the text, the child reader will have to work, but familiarity with the one-liners of television will help with the filling in of the sometimes differing wave-length conversations. . . . The ability to allow pictures to explain the text can be developed by television viewing and may well explain the relative ease with which this television generation understands this book. . . . This is not to forget the one inestimable advantage that the picture-book has over television and that is the reader's freedom to move backwards and forwards over the text as is clearly necessary in *Granpa*. (109-10)

Another Burningham book; another family anecdote--this time at the other end of the difficulty scale. Burningham has produced a set of little, white, square books about details of domestic life. One is called *The Blanket,* and was first read to my niece, Claire, when she was approximately one and a half years old. Not long after her second birthday, she picked it up and "read" it to herself. She could produce only single words at the time, but that was all she needed. She turned the pages and said with appropriate intonation: "Banket. Banket? Banket!" Her "reading" corresponded with the original text to a remarkable degree. "When I go to bed, I always take my blanket." *"Banket."* "One night I could not find my blanket." *"Banket?"* Thus, she read the entire book, to her own satisfaction and the great enjoyment of everyone who listened.

Roderick McGillis has said, "Performance is the condition of literature for children, and the residue of this condition sounds in all literature" (254). This is partially true (and, indeed, in some ways it is true for everybody), but Perry Nodelman has surveyed a number of studies which suggest that very young children are able to interpret visual images without specific instruction (6). Claire could not have read *The Blanket* without having heard it read to her, but once she had some idea of the relationship between pictures and story, the pictures alone were powerful

When I go to bed
I always take my blanket

Figure 2. *The Blanket* by John Burningham

enough for her to recreate the effect and some of the conventions of the story, which clearly has a plot that struck her closely. Even at the age of two, even before her spoken competence ran to a complete sentence, she could "read."

Claire's story is one example of a picture book enabling a reader to tackle material beyond her normal repertoire. David Lewis looks at a different way in which picture books may expand readers' boundaries, citing examples of features common to both picture books and contemporary, adult postmodern literature--"narrative *boundary-breaking* or 'slippage,' *excess*, and *indeterminacy*" (1990, 133). He too cites *Granpa,* along with such books as *Bear Hunt, Where's Julius?,* and *The Jolly Postman.*

Graham points to links between television conventions and picture books; Lewis points to links between picture books and postmodernism. The concepts they describe are very sophisticated ones, yet there does not seem to be any problem about very young children coming to terms with them. What does this tell us about

learning to read in the late twentieth century? What does this tell us about the kinds of readers who are exposed to such material very early in their lives? What can we learn about the potential of adolescent and adult readers who come from such beginnings? Meek and Sartre's grandfathers provide an end-point to one kind of reading trajectory; Burningham's *Granpa* supplies a starting point for a different trajectory, one on which today's readers are more likely to find themselves. The earlier grandfathers represent one kind of reading experience, and some of us may be nostalgic about the decline of that particular kind of *serious* reading. However, the new readers of *Granpa* seem to be on the way to a different kind of adult reading sophistication. What are the implications of that change?

It may help to look at three writers who have investigated some of the complexities which very early readers begin to master in their picture books.

J. A. Appleyard has written a book describing the development of modern readers from childhood to adulthood. He emphasizes two aspects of contemporary childhood reading: the strong element of play and the important transition small children make from the intimacy of being read to at home to the intensely social experience of school reading.

Perry Nodelman has tackled the issue from a different perspective. His book describes the range and variety of conventions which picture-book authors and illustrators can call into play, and draws attention to the complexity and variety of data which small lookers and readers must internalize, even if they never articulate what they are doing.

Judith Graham offers something of a bridge between the two perspectives in her short book, which investigates what and how children learn from picture books about narrative processes and conventions.

Nodelman obviously could not cite Graham or Appleyard, and neither of these books cites either him or each other. An obvious step forward, therefore, would be to attempt some kind of synthesis of what these authors have to say about the role and value of picture-book reading.

The question of play raised by Appleyard is a complex one and one which I

am not qualified to discuss in detail. It seems clear, however, that early competence in processing pictures gives small children scope for playing with books. This can happen in many ways. Like Claire, a child can use the pictures to fuel a reading. We have a photograph of our older daughter, aged about two and a half, "reading," or at least "performing," a picture book to her six-month-old sister; the attention of both children is fixed on the pictures, and whether the older one thinks she is playing a game of reading or performing the actual act seems immaterial. Children pursue details in pictures, invent side-stories, use pictures, plots, and characters as jumping-off points for new games.

In books, children can also face second-hand terrors and griefs, such as the loss of the treasured blanket. This is a different kind of playing. Children have the chance to explore ways of being courageous and resourceful as well. Shirley Hughes is a good example of an author who provides stories of children solving their own problems. In *Dogger,* Bella saves the day for Dave by trading her new teddy bear for the lost Dogger. In *Alfie Gets in First,* Alfie rescues himself, while the adults in the street debate solutions. Reading such stories provides a kind of affective play, a chance to try on solutions.

Books feed into games; play feeds into the understanding of books. Both allow for the creation of alternative worlds. The process does not end with childhood, however. All readers carry fragments of real-life memories, scraps of earlier books, vestiges of previous imaginings, which feed into any reading.

When I first read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," I knew what he meant when he said,

> Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> Though winning near the goal--yet, do not grieve;
> She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

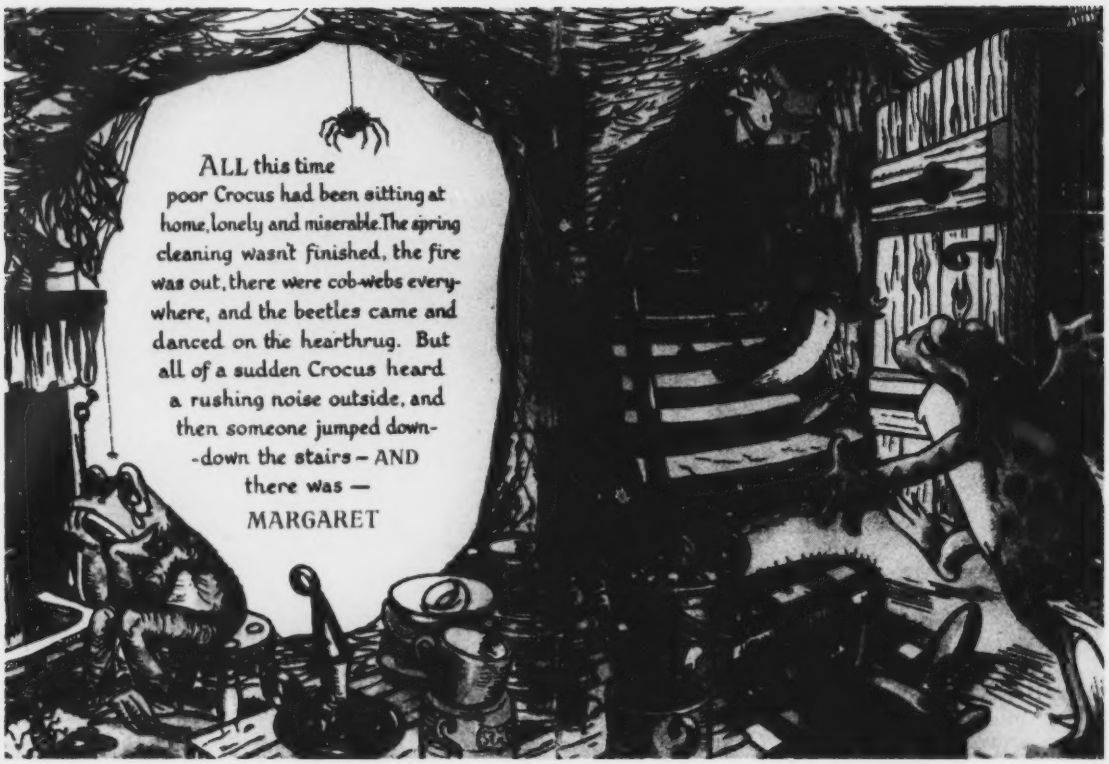
ALL this time
poor Crocus had been sitting at
home, lonely and miserable. The spring
cleaning wasn't finished, the fire
was out, there were cob-webs every-
where, and the beetles came and
danced on the hearthrug. But
all of a sudden Crocus heard
a rushing noise outside, and
then someone jumped down-
-down the stairs – AND
there was —
MARGARET

Figure 3. *The Story of Margaret Field-Mouse* by Cam

My reference point was a picture of Margaret Field-Mouse, forever running down the stairs into the arms of her friend, Crocus Frog, after many sad adventures in the circus. For all of my conscious life, that page from a picture book has been one of my key references for the way art can freeze that most time-bound of experiences, anticipation of the next glorious moment. Such an association is undeniably idiosyncratic, but its validity is easily argued. Other books, other pictures, other stories teach different lessons about narrative or about art in general. And other readers carry different fragments in their heads.

Such intertextual linkages are simultaneously what tie us to our own time and what make us individual. Nick Jones has described it well:

> The term *intertext* is used to describe the associative networks of

textual memory from which our sense of a culture is woven. It is not bound to particular cultures. Readers of print and of television across the world share many of the same stories, the same slogans, the same photographs. They need not, however, share the meanings they make of them. The intertext is not to be conceived as a body of material objects, as in a library. It is constituted only in the collective subjectivity of readers, in the fragmentary *versions* of texts which readers carry with them.

Each reader therefore constructs for him- or herself this network of interrelatedness. The nature of the observed connections will vary from generic resemblances between texts which may be commonly perceived, to chance personal associations. As individual memories are erased or overlaid, the patterns to which they contributed may be weakened, or may be reinforced by new readings.

. . .

The concept of the intertext might be compared to that of *literary tradition*. The difference is that traditions are selective, and are defined or contested by the judgements of public bodies--publishing houses, reviewing panels, examination boards, universities. The intertext, on the other hand, is subjective, and all-embracing. Since it is constituted only in the memories of readers, it cannot be institutionalised; it has no authority. (165)

Fragments of memories of other books and pictures, fragments of personal memories and scenes, filtered through an individual psyche with its own needs and pressures--all these contribute to the way in which a reader makes sense of a text, and all these seem to be functioning very early on. Allan and Janet Ahlberg are perhaps the most talented and inventive of the writers and artists who make this intertextual world open to small children, but it is at work everywhere. In its own way, it is one elaborated form of play.

Appleyard concentrates on the role of play in the reading of young children; his other emphasis is on the shift young children make from the private world of an individual lap to the social world of story time in the nursery classroom. Not all children are read to at home, but most experience at least the school story time. What are they learning about stories by hearing them read aloud?

One of the things they are learning is how to get into a story. The older reader provides a scaffolding, by pausing, explaining, rereading, emphasizing. This happens at home and in school, though obviously it is a more complicated performance when a group is involved.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith has attempted to describe what goes on in a nursery classroom where reading aloud is a regular feature:

> (a) storyreadings were socially interactive events that included active participation by both adult reader and child listeners, and (b) storyreadings were joint ventures in which the "meanings" of storybooks were cooperatively negotiated. (126)

The storyreader, says Cochran-Smith, acts as a monitor and a mediator of the match between the real readers and the implied reader created by the story.

> In order to provide for joint sense-making, the storyreader guided the children in Life-to-Text interactions in which she mediated between child listeners and text. That is, she continuously monitored the match between the reader implied in the text and the real reader/listeners who sat before her listening to the text.
>
> To help them make sense of texts, the storyreader guided the listeners to take on the characteristics of the readers implied in particular books. To shape real reader/listeners into implied readers, or whenever a mismatch between the two seemed to occur, she overrode the textual narrator and became the narrator herself,

> annotating the text and trying to establish some sort of agreement between real and implied readers. The storyreader mediated by alternating between two roles--spokesperson for the text and secondary narrator or commentator on the text. (177)

Judith Graham criticizes Cochran-Smith for over-stressing the explanatory role of the adult, or to be more precise, the teacher:

> No adult should *tell* a child that Granpa and granddaughter have quarrelled when we see them back to back after their little tiff. Their isolation in the vast emptiness of a double-page spread, their puzzled demeanours allow the meanings to grow if . . . the child is given time. All the audio- and video-ed evidence is that teachers intervene too much and do not allow literature to do its own work. I have tried to show how illustrations play their part in the process.
>
> What I think Cochran-Smith does value rightly is the importance of adult readers' intonation, facial expression, head movements. (115)

Hugh Crago comes down somewhere in between and raises an important new issue not considered by either woman. In the early stages of reading a new text, he argues, adult *and* child need more help in the first pages:

> Indeed, it would be surprising if both adults and children did not evidence this process of active grappling with the opening stages of a new aesthetic experience before becoming more completely absorbed. A common-sense explanation would be that we need to establish our points of reference before we can expect to understand the rest of a tale. A less obvious and by no means contradictory explanation (since the cognitive and emotional are so often two sides of the one coin) is

> that all readers of whatever age need a *defence* against the emotional impact of the new imaginative experience provided by a novel (or picture book, or movie), and that they defend themselves by moving in and out of the world of the novel, asking questions about it, comparing it with their own world--being very *rational* precisely because they are under *emotional* threat. . . .
>
> For me, beginning a new novel, watching the curtain go up on a play or a movie, means a threat to the extent that I'm forced, temporarily, to submit myself to somebody else's world; some aspects of that world are bound to be alien to me, and may generate feelings of disquiet, even of anger. That I know I'm *choosing* to undergo this because I also expect to derive pleasure from it doesn't help. I have to pass through this stage every time, until the tale takes hold and absorption becomes more pleasurable than threatening. (179-80)

A new book is an emotional threat. As Harold Brodkey has said, "Reading is an intimate act, perhaps more intimate than any other human act. I say that because of the prolonged (or intense) exposure of one mind to another" (quoted in Booth, 168). Trusting a new author with such intense access to your mind and emotions is a terrifying prospect (and one certain source of the appeal of series books which are safer because of their familiarity). Appleyard points out one source of security for the child learning to make such a leap: the reassurance of the lap and the greater experience of the helping adult. Graham discusses another possible source of support: the child's own competence in reading the pictures.

Nodelman goes into some detail, describing studies which conclude both that very young infants can interpret visual images without having been taught how to do so and also that there are many learned conventions of looking at pictures nevertheless. One fascinating example he gives is the way that Western readers interpret illustrations in directional terms. Nodelman cites Mercedes Gaffron, who suggests that we conventionally follow what he calls a "glance curve," a fixed path of

> from the left foreground back around the picture space to the right background. Because we look first at the left foreground, we tend to place ourselves in that position and to identify with the objects or figures located there. (135)

As well as a convention for locating the viewpoint from the left foreground, Nodelman points out other implications of our directional bias:

> Since we tend to "read" the pictures in picture books by moving our glance from left to right, we usually assume that figures of characters pointed toward the right are moving forward. Rosie heads to the right throughout Pat Hutchins's *Rosie's Walk*, while the goat, who appears in a few of the pictures, turns to the left and is clearly not moving anywhere.
>
> In fact, action usually moves from left to right in picture books; and obviously, then, time conventionally passes from left to right. (163)

Nodelman goes on to discuss elaborations of these conventions, such as the idea that in some books a character moving to the right is moving away from home, and one moving to the left is returning home. To confirm the strength of our expectations concerning direction, his book includes an illustration from an Israeli book about a train. The Hebrew text moves from right to left and so does the train; the effect is startling. A loss of continuity can also be startling, and Dorothy White describes her daughter Carol, aged three, trying to come to terms with a break in what she has obviously already developed as expectations:

> On one page the pram is shown slipping downwards, but when one turns over-leaf for another picture of the descent the pram continues

> downward in another direction. The pictures don't flow, and Carol kept turning the pages backwards and forwards with a puzzled expression. (43)

The detailed diaries kept by a few parents, such as Dorothy White, of their children's early years with picture books confirm that even though children may be readily at home with visual images, they need to learn how these conventions work. Children are sometimes confused when a character appears twice on facing pages, and have to come to terms with the implication of time passing. In the double-page opening from *Margaret Field-Mouse* cited earlier, for example, the setting extends across the two pages without a break, but Crocus and her stool appear twice. Obviously, a visual narrative convention is at work.

Appleyard cites three sets of parental records of child reading, and does a good job of synthesizing the implications of their findings. He observes:

> The way Carol, Rachel, and Anna think seems to be typical of very young children. They appear to inhabit a world of highly personal concrete images that are loosely woven together in fragile relationship and are intensely involving. It is a timeless world where appearances and identities readily change and where contradictions lie undisturbed side by side, an animistic world where a little boy in a story or a princess sleeping because of a poisoned apple are as real as the rain or toy blocks or a playmate. Mental life here seems to be a tentative process of evolving meaning for these realities out of experience, of sorting out cognitive and emotional responses, and of stabilizing them into something resembling the accepted adult picture of the world.
>
> What value should we put on this kind of thinking? Is it only childish muddle and confusion that these children will eventually grow out of, or is it the foundation on which a rich and promising imaginative life will build? The answer to this question makes a great deal of difference to what we think

about young children's responses to stories. (26)

Judith Graham does not try to answer such an enormous question. Instead she looks at the specific but very important question of how children move from mastering the way pictures work to applying such lessons to narrative in general.

If a child starts with an innate capacity to make some sense out of visual images, he or she has a competence which provides a place to stand on, as it were, while other conventions are learned. Mastering these conventions gives the child new and wider-ranging competence but it does more than that; it is a route into understanding the concepts and messages of pattern and of convention itself.

Margaret Meek gives a detailed account of Ben, a young reader who needed extra attention "because of his slow progress with the phonics check list" (1988, 8), and of his first encounter with *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins. First, he and she discussed the cover, and although it is very stylized, and Ben's own experience is urban rather than rural, he recognized the elements of the picture. Meek then describes his encounter with the title page:

> When we open the page at the first two-page spread, Rosie is in her coop at the left-hand side--where the reader's eyes naturally go if books aren't an entire novelty. Beyond her, on the right-hand page, is the farm, now with more buildings, and beyond it a cornfield, a distant goat, a tractor, a cart and beehives. There is no sign of the fox. The print on this page is *Pat Hutchins, ROSIE'S WALK, The Bodley Head, London, Sydney, Toronto*. Most accomplished readers turn this page, taking the conventions of publishing for granted. . . . [We turned the page] and found the same words again, this time in tiny print with the publisher's address and the date. When did you learn that you don't read these words as part of the story? (1988, 9)

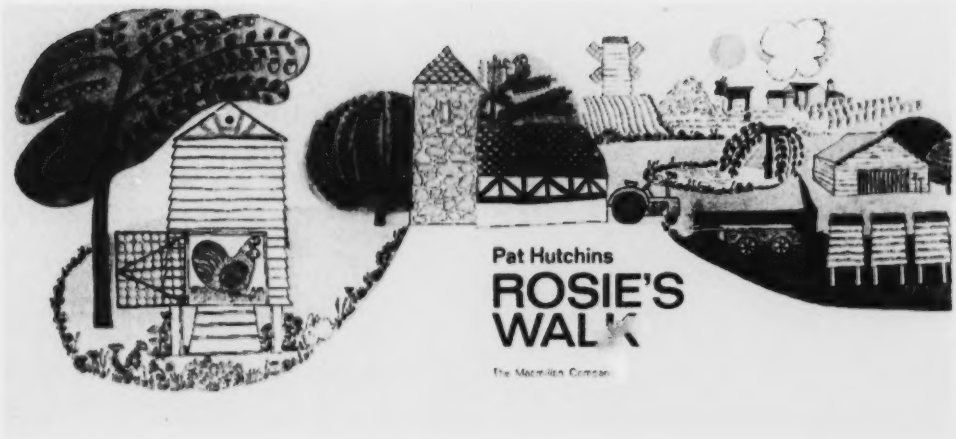

Figure 4. *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins

Meek does a good job of making visible some of the learning which a reading of a picture book can provide. However, I think she underestimates just how much Pat Hutchins may be teaching the novice reader. Meek says the reader's eyes go "naturally" to the left-hand side, but Nodelman has pointed out that this, too, is a conventional arrangement for cultures where writing works left-to-right. In fact, Hutchins, by putting Rosie in this key spot on the title page, may actually be teaching her young viewer to "start here." In my paperback copy of *Rosie's Walk,* the words on the title page fill a white space on the lower part of the right page, so the reader whose attention is first attracted by Rosie then is inclined to follow the "glance curve" round to the background of the right-hand page. Although Meek has rendered visible much of what we usually ignore as part of our reading process, this is one aspect of looking at a picture book that still seems transparent to her. How many such pages must you look at before starting at the left feels simply natural?

Judith Graham has explored not just this issue of how pictures train viewers to look at pictures, but also the wider issue of how picture books help readers to

master other literary conventions:

> Always the general assumption has been that the pictures lure the child into the book and that once there attention to the language will develop reading abilities. Of course, this is not unlikely and I would not want to deny the power of a good narrative text to contribute to the development of readers. But I shall be arguing that we must not ignore the potential in the illustration of a book to create readers, not only in their own right as in a wordless text, but also when combined in certain telling ways with a carefully constructed text. Illustrations are thus very much more than "cobwebs to catch flies" as they have been called.
>
> It is perhaps not surprising that the contribution of illustrations to reading development has been seriously underestimated. It is only relatively recently that our understanding of the reading process has broadened sufficiently for us to recognize that anything other than close attention to letters was what mattered. How our understanding of the act of reading has grown for it to include such matters as knowledge of narrative conventions and "imaging" (or interior visualization) is the subject of the first two chapters. How illustrations make their contribution to these and other growing competences in the developing reader is investigated in the rest of this study. . . .
>
> With each book, I have tried to answer the questions--Could these illustrations initiate children into the conventions of narrative? Could this picture-book play a formative role in the making of a reader? To my knowledge, no one approaches the picture-book in order to isolate what narrative conventions the illustrations teach. (9-10)

Graham gives many lively examples of how pictures can inculcate readers into

the ways of telling stories, and it is not possible to rehearse all her arguments here. For example, she suggests that in simple stories the illustrator can build up details and nuances of character which are far more complicated than the level of prose can create:

> [T]he illustrator uses facial expression, bodily stance and clothing to convey to the reader information that she or he will use to build a believable and memorable fictional character. If the illustrator can beckon the child into the story in these ways, make the child care about this solemn child or that mischievous creature and show that the investment the child has made will be rewarded by the story-teller's art then it is a lesson that the illustrator can teach in the art of becoming a reader that the writer will continue to teach, building on the illustrator's early work. The child who later can enter the secondary world created only by language may have learnt how to do so from any number of talented illustrators. (43)

Not only do the pictures help in creating characters and settings, they can also do more subtle, less obvious work:

> [A]s texts become longer, illustrations may be used less to tell continuous story and more to guide readers' grasp of significant points in the plot (as well as create character and setting and mood as earlier discussed). However there are several longer texts where illustrations still do very much more than fill in by "verisimilitude" . . . . [She discusses *Piggybook*, by Anthony Browne, as one example where the pictures tell a story that is never alluded to by the words.] In a book of this quality the reader moves constantly between the text and the pictures in a complex process of picturing text and verbalizing pictures, allowing one to complement the other in a way that will lay a

> foundation for the complex transformation of text into experience that will come with reading solely verbal text. Whilst there are visual conventions that have to be learnt and whilst pictures are culturally specific and therefore not unproblematic, the fact that pictures can be understood from a relatively early age enables the illustrator who enjoys the challenge to display a range of story-events with or without text which adds to the reader's growing command and understanding of narrative. (82-3)

Not all picture books do this, of course. In many cases the picture merely repeats the information already provided by the text. Where the pictures expand, contradict, or comment on the text, however, the reader is learning a flexible, subtle, complex attitude to reading. Many metaphors can describe such a process: there is a kind of counterpoint between text and illustrations; the illustrations invite the reader to read between the lines; the illustrations can fill or create gaps in the text. Such metaphors are active in current descriptions of reading text alone, and serve to point up the linkages.

I have quoted Graham extensively because of the quality of her analysis of how pictures can lead children into relationships with texts, even enabling them to develop an understanding of something as difficult as irony. However, her approach to the topic is geared to the relatively static headings of people, settings, story, and themes. These are aspects of the book rather than actions of the reader. There is a more dynamic way of looking at the same analysis, which complements Graham's own approach.

The vocabulary of Peter Rabinowitz lends itself to a more activist interpretation of what the reader does. In his book, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation,* Rabinowitz outlines four groups of "rules" by which twentieth-century, Western readers use conventions to organize their experiences and expectations of texts. These are as follows: rules of notice, by which readers decide what is important in a text; rules of signification, by which they decide

how to pay attention to what they have decided is important; rules of configuration, by which they make predictions about the likely shape of the plot; and rules of coherence, by which they sum up and make sense of the book as a whole, reinterpreting where necessary to incorporate surplus information or make up what the text lacks. What makes these rules interesting is the way they describe how the reader is guided by the text during the actual temporal process of reading.

However, Rabinowitz pays virtually no attention to the process by which a naive reader acquires experience of these rules and the ability to operate within them more or less automatically. Graham's suggestion, that the child uses the accessibility of pictures to help acquire the conventions of narrative structure, helps fill that gap.

The child, listening to the text or even reading it for him- or herself, takes in what the words have to say. Meanwhile, the picture augments this information.

How does the reader apply rules of notice? The picture is one major source of information about what is important. Furthermore, it is a source open to the child's own rigorous attention. Children sometimes concentrate on a detail in the picture that is not crucial to the story, but the words can provide a second cue about what is really important, and the child learns more about making judgements. Transcripts of small children reading picture books with their parents provide examples of active discussion of rules of notice.

As for rules of signification, often the pictures supply information, beyond the text, about how the reader is supposed to attend to those elements of the story judged to be important. Judith Graham looks, for example, at the kind of information provided by characters' clothing:

> The vocabulary of clothes again defines very clearly the character of the gorilla Willy in *Willy the Wimp*. No child is going to be able to see a fair-isle knitted pull-over from now onwards without associating it with the submissive Willy. Significantly, even when he has improved his physique at the body-building club . . . he still wears his fair-isle sweater preparing us perhaps for the denouement where it is clear that

> his essential courteous nature has not changed. A fair-isle sweater is of course a fairly individual item of clothing and marks the wearer as special; which indeed Willy is compared with the flashy and denim-uniformed gang he has to face. (41-2)

This is just one example of how a picture may lead a reader to pay a particular kind of attention to an aspect of a text. Expressions on faces, activities in the background, relationships between characters--there are numerous examples where information which would have to be very elaborately expressed in text is economically conveyed in pictures.

The relationship between the kinds of things children learn from picture books and the rules of configuration may be a bit more subtle. In this case, Graham and Nodelman would both argue that children need to learn the fact that pictures actually work in a conventional way; and Appleyard's digest of parental diaries of young children looking at picture books would confirm that these issues are learned and not innate. Just discovering that there are ways to make sense of a set of data is one crucial lesson in itself. The idea that a character who appears on both pages of an opening may represent that person at different points of time is one example. The concept of pattern, of design, of shape, of rules, may be more evident to a child in dealing with pictures, at least initially. At a minimum, the child is in a better position to question the pictures, and to learn that picture books are rule-bound objects. Such an understanding of convention at work is a breakthrough in its own right, and may help to develop the idea of the shape and pattern of a plot.

Finally, the pictures self-evidently contribute to the overall coherence of the book as a whole. Michael Steig, in a review of Nodelman's book, draws attention to the ways in which the pictures can sometimes actually subvert the text--or vice versa. *Rosie's Walk* is the classic example: the very discrepancy between text and pictures is part of the shape of the whole. Nodelman gives a vivid analysis of the way the pictures, as well as the words, are arranged and patterned in *Where the Wild Things Are* to contain the potential threat of the Wild Things and make a story which

satisfies on a number of levels.

Henrietta Dombey, in a study of a mother and her daughter, Anna, reading *Rosie's Walk,* makes some observations about how pictures may work as a link between the kinds of understanding children develop through watching television (with its "moving pictures," as the old-fashioned phrase so helpfully puts it) and their need to come to terms with the workings of narrative prose. This is more than a question of visual alertness; it is an issue, again, of coming to terms with conventions and mental imagings. Referring to a transcript of a reading (not the first) of *Rosie's Walk,* she comments on differences in stance between straight narrative text and the hermeneutic code of verbal and visual narrative:

> The sure voice of Genette's classical subsequent narration has been replaced by the tentative voice of the spectator who feels an excited uncertainty about the outcome of the events she is witnessing. . . . Their comments represent the actions and characters as operating in the present, not the past. What is in the picture is happening now, whereas what is in the verbal narrative has already happened. The ever-present sense of uncertainty about what might happen next is in marked contrast to the immutable certainty of the narrative. Mother and child seem to be concerned not simply to establish an invariant story, but also to construct a fictive world containing possibilities that extend beyond the invariant story of the spoken narrative. As they look at the pictures their intention seems to be to construe them not simply in order to identify elements in the story, nor just to supply elements missing from the verbal narrative. They seem instead to construe them in order to articulate a world where many things might happen. Just after this extract, Anna's mother says with apparent conviction, "I think he's going to get her this time," despite the fact that she has read the story to Anna many times before and both know that the fox will be perpetually frustrated in his attempts to catch Rosie.

Anna reveals a similar concern with the possible story future rather than with the certain story past when she asks whether the fox is able to get out of the hay. At the end she announces firmly that the fox can't get Rosie in her cage.

Through their conversational talk, mother and child are creating a story world and moving about inside it, making judgments on its elements and exploring its possibilities and laws. Within this world there are many things to talk about, and as the other readings of this story indicate, the topics chosen vary from one reading to the next. At each reading a different "reading" is constructed. Yet where they talk of what might happen, their speculations are bounded by the limitations of the story world of this particular genre. There is no suggestion that the fox might get bored, that Rosie might get run over by the lorry from the egg marketing board or that the farmer might eat her for supper. For in this genre the characters behave autonomously and consistently, the significant events that take place are the outcome of this behaviour, and the social and mechanical complexities of the modern world are, by and large, kept at bay.

We cannot know in detail the extent to which the potential structures of the narrative are actualised for Anna. But an examination of the conversational utterances has shown us her concern to articulate the set of kernel events, to savour the hermeneutic tension, and not to overstep the bounds of the genre. (33-4)

Anna, it seems, is looking at the huge potential expressed in the eternal present of the pictures, but at the same time coming to terms with the limitations put on the story by the invariant text.

It would be possible to go into greater detail at this stage, but the general points seem clear. Children, with greater capacity to make their own judgments about pictures than about words, can become extremely sophisticated "readers" of

picture books before they are able to decode a word of text for themselves. It remains to consider briefly how this may affect two aspects of their future as readers: their perceptions about the ways reading works, and the kind of personal intertext they carry about as part of their individual mental baggage.

Margaret Meek argues:

> [L]iterature for children may be seen as the significant model, the cultural paradigm of subsequent literature in *the experience of the reader*. Children's literature is, undeniably, the *first* literary experience, where the reader's expectations of what literature *is* are laid down. (1982, 168)

Thus, young readers are at one level being acculturated into our ideas of reading conventions. At another level, because they deal with such dynamic books at a very early stage in developing a sense of convention, it may well be that their ideas of what breaks new ground are completely different even from those of the adult who enjoys and is familiar with many picture books. David Lewis describes his own two children responding to yet another book by John Burningham: *Where's Julius?* Julius is always engaged in some adventure when his parents call him in for a meal. At first these adventures are simple and everyday: building a den, digging a hole. Suddenly, and without warning, they become fantastic. Julius cannot come in to eat because he is climbing pyramids, shooting rapids, throwing snowballs at wolves. His parents carry his meal out to him regardless, seemingly unaware of any incongruity. Lewis describes his own reading of this book and those of his children, aged eight and five:

> My own first reading of the book left me amused but faintly perplexed by the "problem" of where Julius actually was. I took this one feature of the book to be a pivotal point around which any interpretation of the tale must move. I also felt it was less easy to

naturalise . . . than, say, *Come Away from the Water, Shirley,* where the mundane and fantastic imagery can be contemplated literally side by side. However, there is no evidence from any of the transcripts that the children were at all troubled by this aspect of the text, though they certainly found the book funny. No comments or remarks were made at the stage where the book was being read, and during the retellings there was no indication that the children were trying to normalise the text by trying to account for the juxtaposition of incompatible worlds or that they were particularly disturbed or puzzled by its effects. Claire simply referred to Julius's "journeys" when counting them, and later, when listing them, she drew no distinction between "he dugged a hole" and "he climbed a pyramid." Both children seemed to accept the change in the rules and the alternating pattern without demur.

It is difficult to interpret the children's silence on this matter. It may simply be that they were familiar enough with Burningham's *oeuvre,* and with books of a like kind, to find them unremarkable. It may also be the case that children who are still learning what it means to read as well as what books can do, are less beguiled by the opening pages than we might suppose. What constitutes a book has to be learned, and that includes the rules by which one might read it. When writings offer contrasting rule systems within one book and play off our expectations in a spirit of fun, such games and playfulness are more readily accepted perhaps by the apprentices than by their masters precisely because they have a less fully formed set of preconceptions. An adult reader might wish for a more determinate answer to the question "Where's Julius?" than the author is willing to provide, but a child may find such a question less pressing and consequently may not find the indeterminacy too troublesome. (1992, 61-62)

Margaret Meek, in the vanguard of grappling with the uncertainties of

describing new readers who read different kinds of books in different ways, comments on the limitations of our critical vocabulary as we try to describe children's reading by drawing on our own recollections of reading different texts in different times and in different ways:

> We seem to lack descriptions for those aspects of new books for children which enlarge and help to develop their understanding of reading itself because we are still reading backwards, drawing on experiences that young readers have yet to have and, in the process, denying that reading can and must be different. If the value of reading is so clearly in transition, can we make this plain to ourselves before we try to describe it for others? Are we all too old for new reading lessons? (1992, 28)

Contemporary children's stories make use of new and different conventions, and in the process may well be creating new and different readers. But that is not all that has changed in a single generation. There are very significant changes of quantity as well as of quality of exposure to new writing and illustration. The enormous market in picture books, the spread of paperback versions, the emphasis on reading to children in nursery schools and the early stages of elementary education, the welcome offered to very small children by most public libraries nowadays--all these are part of Western societies in the late twentieth century. They all represent changes in emphasis even since my childhood. Even children of non-readers are more likely than ever before to be exposed to a huge range of titles. The scope, variety, and sophistication of today's picture books is also a new factor. I led a bookish childhood, but I never dreamt of the literary richness my children took for granted from their first year of life. Even today, they and their friends know that picture books can offer genuine delights. Recently, a visiting thirteen-year-old sat on our floor with *The Jolly Postman* and *The Jolly Christmas Postman* and attentively read every detail--twice.

From a personal anecdote to a more general example: every year in the United Kingdom, a report is issued by the office which administers the fees earned by British authors from the Public Lending Right Act of 1979. This report includes two lists, one of the 100 most popular adult books by British authors as revealed in the borrowing figures at a sample of libraries, and the other, the equivalent list of the 100 most popular children's books. The most striking element in these lists is the contrast in quality between children's borrowings and adult borrowings. The 1989 adult list is dominated by Catherine Cookson, Dick Francis, Danielle Steel, Jeffrey Archer, and so forth. On the children's list, almost every author mentioned in this essay appears: Allan and Janet Ahlberg, Anthony Browne, John Burningham, Shirley Hughes, Pat Hutchins. These authors and their generous, challenging, witty, and instructive picture books are becoming part of the repertoire, part of the intertext of a generation of young readers. Their grandfathers and great-grandfathers might be taken aback, but the potential for developing a new kind of sophisticated and resourceful reader can hardly be denied.

A final word should come from Appleyard. In his survey of how reading can develop over a lifetime, he arrives at a subtle and flexible definition of what reading is:

> [T]he act of reading is primarily an encounter between a particular reader and a particular text in a particular time and place, an encounter that brings into existence the story, poem, or work in question. The story is not the same as the text on the page, nor is it simply the reader's uniquely personal response to the text. Rather the story is an event that has roots both in the text and in the personality and history that the reader brings to the reading. The text is a system of response-inviting structures that the author has organized by reference to a repertory of social and literary codes shared by author and reader. But it does not simply cause or limit the reader's response, nor does the reader passively digest the text. Rather, reader

> and text interact in a feedback loop. The reader brings expectations derived from a literary and life experience to bear on the text, and the text feeds back these expectations or it does not. The reader filters this feedback through characteristic defenses, imbues them with fantasies, and transforms the event into an experience of moral, intellectual, social, and aesthetic coherence. (9-10)

Picture books enable children to experience this event from a very early stage in their lives. We know that extremely young children have worked out at least some social conventions; the evidence of "scripts" which they produce about such socially constructed events as birthday parties tells us so much (see Hudson and Shapiro). The picture book gives them equivalent access to literary codes. Armed with this background, however vestigial, children can be readers. Appleyard's definition is complex and elaborate, but his description not only covers the adult encountering the most demanding fiction; equally, it describes Claire "reading" *The Blanket.* Any analysis of contemporary reading by children, adolescents, and adults should take account of this new reality.

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